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HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

Paper: HOUSTON CHRONICLE**Date:** THU 04/14/2005**Section:** ThisWeek**Page:** 5**Edition:** 2 STAR**Federal regulations on train whistles delayed / West U., Bellaire, Houston officials continue to pursue plan for quiet zone**

By ANNE MARIE KILDAY, Houston Chronicle Correspondent

Officials from Houston, Bellaire and West University Place met April 4 in the office of Houston City Councilman Mark Goldberg to continue planning for a quiet zone along the Union Pacific railroad tracks, despite another delay of federal regulations allowing a ban on train whistles.

Goldberg and Houston City Councilwoman Pam Holm are spearheading the city of Houston's efforts to design safety measures that would establish a quiet zone along the Union Pacific tracks at 14 intersections from Memorial Park through Bellaire and West University Place to Willowbend.

The Federal Railroad Administration in late 2003 proposed a rule that would require all railroad locomotives to sound their whistles at intersections.

Those rules, however, make it easier for communities to create "quiet zones" banning train horns or whistles.

The rules were initially scheduled to go into effect in January, then were delayed to April 5.

Last week, the FRA announced it had changed the effective date of the new rule until June 24. That would mean quiet zones in the Houston area might not be implemented until late July at the earliest.

"We are keenly aware that communities nationwide are eagerly awaiting publication of the Final Rule," FRA Acting Administrator Robert D. Jamison said in a press release issued by the agency.

"We are confident that it will satisfactorily address the varied concerns and interests of communities throughout the country regarding the use of train horns at highway-rail grade crossings."

This change will give public authorities additional time to establish the necessary conditions that will permit them to preserve pre-existing whistle bans or establish new quiet zones within their respective jurisdictions

The city of Houston is determined to put a quiet zone into effect in neighborhoods in central Houston,

Bellaire and West U., Holm said.

"The reality is we all know it is going to happen. It is absolute going to happen," Holm said.

She guessed that the federal regulations would take effect in early June and that Houston's efforts to silence train horns could begin a month later.

"We think and are very, very, very hopeful that by the first of July, we will be designated as a city with a quiet zone and it would be effective," Holm said.

Holm acknowledged that the repeated delay in the final implementation of the FRA regulations "is very frustrating," especially for Houston, Bellaire and West U. residents who live near the Union Pacific railroad tracks.

The latest delays are, apparently, the result of House Speaker Dennis Hastert's understanding of the adage that "all politics is local."

Holm said the Illinois Republican asked the federal Office of Management and Budget to review the potential costs of keeping quiet zones in Chicago, where hundreds of thousands of people live near the elevated commuter trains.

Most of the intersections along Chicago's commuter trains have had unofficial quiet zones. Hastert wanted assurances that keeping the train horns quiet in northern Illinois wouldn't be cost-prohibitive.

Engineering plans for putting the quiet zone into effect have been drawn, with assistance from regional representatives of the federal agency, Holm said.

"It's my understanding that we have completely engineered our plans and that while it doesn't necessarily have to be approved by the Federal Railroad Administration, we have assurances that it does meet all of the requirements," Holm said.

The purpose of the meeting was for Houston, Bellaire and West U. officials to discuss an inter-local agreement specifying which cities would pay the costs for installing safety measures at railroad intersections, Satterwhite told the Bellaire City Council.

The cost to the city of Bellaire "is something we are trying to determine," Bellaire City Manager Bernie Satterwhite said.

"We are really talking about one quiet zone and that includes some 14 intersections, so it's either all or nothing," he added. "If you break it down crossing by crossing, and look at it that way, certainly we don't have that many crossings.

"But how many of those crossings really impact us? The sound carries and they have to sound their horns at least a quarter-mile prior (to an intersection)."

But, Satterwhite said, when the idea of a quiet zone was first brought up about two years ago by residents of West University and Bellaire, the costs would have been prohibitive because of then-existing safety requirements.

"When we first started discussing this, I didn't think it would ever happen," Satterwhite said. "Now that we are looking at something more reasonable, I think it could be doable."

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